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The effectiveness of the task-based learning in developing students' speaking skills in academic settings on the EFL classroom-A study conducted at South East European University (SEEU)

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Abstract

Practice has shown that low-level proficiency students have problems expressing themselves using accurate, fluent and even simple sentences. This is reflected in their final oral exams. Hesitation to speak English might be because students have underdeveloped speaking skills as they do not use the language in real-life situations. For this reason students need extensive help and exposure to the English language.

Task-based language teaching is an approach seeking to provide learners with a natural context for language use. As learners work to complete a task, they have abundant opportunity to interact. Such interaction is thought to facilitate language acquisition as learners have to work to understand each other and to express their own meaning (Larsen-Freeman 2000:114).

The paper elaborates and analyzes the effectiveness of the task-based learning approach on the development of students speaking skills in academic settings.

Key terms: language teaching, task-based approach, speaking skills, task

Introduction

The practice has shown that students in the groups of lower-level English proficiency at the Language Centre have problems expressing themselves using accurate, fluent and even simple sentences. This is reflected in their final oral exams, as the scores are usually very low, especially in speaking skills. Often, students have underdeveloped speaking skills because they do not use the target language outside the classroom, in real-life situations. On the other side, we face situations in which the content in a course book is presented in an unattractive way. Put in such situation, it becomes very difficult to stimulate the students' interest, keep their attention and motivate them to participate in tailored book activities. Allwright and Bailey (1991) suggest that "even if everything else

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seems favourable, learners can ‘switch off’ because they do not like the way content of their course is presented in the teaching materials” (p.162). For this reason students need extensive help and exposure to the English language. Hashim (2006) argues that learning a language flourishes most when learners are in positive environment and are given opportunities to communicate in authentic situations. Accordingly, it has been suggested that teachers abandon the traditional teaching approach and replace it with communicative language teaching (Lochana and Deb, 2006). As our students have a limited exposure to using English outside the classroom, task-based activities offer them an opportunity to develop cognitive processes. During their task activities they are required to do a creative/critical thinking, problem –solving, work in a team and use the language communicatively. Nunan (2004) suggests that task-based learning encourages student-centered learning, helps learners develop individual differences and supports learning autonomy.

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The objectives of this study are:

- to explore, elaborate and analyze the effectiveness of the task-based learning approach on development of the students speaking skills in academic settings.
- to reveal the effects of the implementation of a task-based approach,
- to examine if task-based learning can motivate and help students speak freely.

Literature review

Task-based teaching has increasingly achieved esteem in recent years and has been recommended as a way forward in ELT. At the 1970’s and 1980’s tasks were frequently called “communicative activities”(Crookes ,1986).The term “communicative activities” were gradually replaced by “tasks”(Bygate et al.,2001).Prabhu stands as the most appreciable person in the development of task-based teaching literature. His main attempt has been raising awareness towards this approach. Prabhu (1987) defines a task as “an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process” (p 24).

A task refers to a language learning effort that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate and produce target language as they perform the set task, involving real-world language (Richards, 1986). According to Willis (1998), tasks are activities in which the target language is used for a communicative purpose to achieve an outcome. On the other hand; Nunan (2004) uses the word ‘task’ instead of ‘activity.’ Ellis (2003) defines “tasks” as activities that are primarily focused on meaning whereas exercises are activities that are primarily focused on form. The definition of the task has been simplified to as follows:

- meaning is primary
- there is a problem to solve
- the performance is outcome evaluated
- there is a real world relationship.

According to Willis (1996:35-6) task-based language teaching defines eight purposes:

1. to give learners confidence in trying out whatever language they know;
2. to give learners experience of spontaneous interaction;
3. to give learners the chance to benefit from noticing how others express similar meanings;
4. to give learners chances for negotiating turns to speak;
5. to engage learners in using language purposefully and cooperatively;
6. to make learners participate in a complete interaction, not just one-off sentences;
7. to give learners chances to try out communication strategies; and
8. to develop learners' confidence that they can achieve communicative goals.

Many scholars have already embedded the task-based approach in their teaching and the results, in most of the cases, were positive. I will briefly mention some of the scholars who have implemented their methods, and presented their results.

Lopez (2004) conducted an experiment based on task-based instructions instead of presentation-practice-production (PPP) approach for teaching English in two classes in a private school in the south of Brazil. He found that students using task-based instructions (TBI) learned English more effectively because they were using the language to do things-to access information, solve problems, and to talk about personal experiences.

Tanasarnsanee (2002), compares teaching Japanese language using the 3Ps and task-based learning approaches. The result shows that learners who learned Japanese language through task-based learning demonstrated a higher competence in Japanese language for communication than those who studied using the 3Ps (present, practice, and production) approach.

Ellis (2003) emphasizes that task-based language teaching is a form of teaching that treats language primarily as a tool for communicating rather than as an object for study or manipulation.

Components of the task-based teaching Framework

The TBT framework consists of three main phrases, provides 3 basic conditions for language learning

1. Pre-task (including topic and task) prepares learners to perform tasks in ways that promote acquisition.
2. Task cycle: offers learners the chance to use whatever language they already know in order to carry out the task and then to improve their language under the teacher's guidance while planning their reports on the task.

There are three components of a task cycle:

- *Task*: Learners use whatever language they can master, working simultaneously, in pairs or small groups to achieve goals of the task.
- *Planning*: Learners plan their reports effectively and maximize their learning opportunities.
- *Report*: is the natural condition of the task cycle. In this stage learners tell the class about their findings.

3. Post-task stage: provides an opportunity for students to reflect on their task and encourages attention to form, in particular to problematic forms which

demonstrate when learners have accomplished the task.

Before implementing this approach, teachers should be acquainted with the types of task to be presented to the students. Willis has categorised them into six types of tasks which are:

Six types of task (Willis 1996)

- LISTENING: brainstorming, fact-finding
- ORDERING AND SORTING: sequencing, ranking, categorizing, classifying
- COMPARING: matching, finding similarities and differences
- PROBLEM SOLVING: analyzing real or hypothetical situations
- SHARING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES: narrating, describing, exploring and explaining opinions, reactions
- CREATIVE TASKS: brainstorming, fact-finding, ordering and sorting, comparing problem solving etc.

Significance of the study

The study examined how students perceive the incorporation of the task-based teaching, particularly in speaking activities and gives insight to which EFL teachers might refer. It investigated students attitudes towards these approach and derived conclusions how it affected the autonomous learning. It also examined the the teachers' attitudes towards the usage of task-based activities. The study results can be useful for all teachers of languages at SEEU because this Institution has a tendency to use modern ways and approaches towards language teaching in order to make students independent learners and make classes more student centered.

Participants

The participants in this study are SEEU undergraduate students, between the ages of 18-25. The total sample of participants consists of 60 students, male and female, all in the multicultural classroom setting. Their level of proficiency is pre-intermediate and intermediate.

Methods

Study data is collected through a student and teacher's questionnaire and investigates their attitudes towards task-based teaching and learning. The questionnaires are designed in the form of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" with values 1-5 assigned to each alternative. The questionnaires were distributed to six LC English teachers and to the 60 students.

The study is conducted on a sample of two groups: an experimental group taught by the task-based program (TBP) and a control group taught conventionally. The discussion of the findings is presented according to the research questions of the study. The experiment was done during the winter 2012 semester within 8 weeks period of time.

The following instruments were used in this study:

A pre-test of speaking skills and post-test to measure the effect of the task-based approach on the students' oral interaction. The first data (pre-test) scores were collected from students' first introduction class. Everyone was given 3 min. time to introduce themselves to the classmates. At this point for each student I took a note on a speaking

rubric. The post-test results were collected after students were exposed to the task-based teaching, again based on the same grading speaking rubric. This time the experimental group was given a topic to be discussed in the group.

Experiment class I:

Students in group of four discuss about their mobile phones. They compare them and come up with a conclusion on whose mobile is more/most expensive. The aim of this activity was to give students oral practice in ranking information and expressing an opinion using comparatives and superlatives. Each student has a role (timekeeper, recorder, facilitator, reporter) in this was they are all engaged in the activity.

Experiment class II:

Students are put in groups of 4-5. Each of them gets the role (see above activity) they are given time limit to discuss about their last holiday activities. The aim of this task was to provide opportunity for the students to practice target language and revise the weather vocabulary from previous class using past simple.

The test covered the dimensions of accuracy and fluency. A rubric for assessing the students' oral interaction was used to assess the students' performance before and after implementing the task-based approach.

The study attempts to answer these questions:

1. What are the teachers' attitudes towards the Task-based teaching?
2. What are students' perceptions of the Task-based learning?
3. How effective is the employment of the Task-based teaching on students' performance in terms of improving their speaking skills?

Interpretation of Findings / Results

Q1: What are the teachers' attitudes towards the Task-based teaching?

The overall impression of the LC teachers is that TBL has a positive effect on students learning process. They do believe that using authentic material helped students kept engaged in the meaningful interactions in the classroom. TBL can enhance the interactions among students in class, it improves learners' communicative competency and provides students with more opportunities to use English.

Q2: What are students' perceptions of the Task-based learning?

The task-based learning assisted learners enjoy learning English. Students were more motivated by the task which connects to real life situation than the activities in the book. Their impression is that task-based learning provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote target language use. They enjoyed the work group activities. Students claim that using tasks activities is a good way to improve English vocabulary and gives them more chances to practice English.

Q3: How effective is the employment of the Task-based teaching on students' performance in terms of improving their speaking skills?

In task-based learning, the tasks are central to the learning activity. The paper reveals that students can learn more effectively when their attention is focused on the task;

therefore they are focused more on the language they use than on the grammatical form. The classroom atmosphere is comfortable, cooperative and there is a lot of interaction among students. As a result of all the above mentioned conditions; students score more result on the rubric for assessing the students' oral interaction. In addition, we should also emphasize the fact that the different task types stimulated different interactional patterns. As a result, some task types might be more appropriate than others for learners at particular levels of proficiency. As tasks are goal-oriented they are the ultimate reason that moves the student to engage in a task. While completing task-based activities, students' acquire new words. Learning new vocabulary helps students become more fluent because the more words they know, the easier it is to express themselves. Acquiring new vocabulary make students feel that they are learning new things and not relying only on previous knowledge.

Conclusion

The results of the research questions reveal that task-based teaching offers variety for the students. It improves their learning since encourages students in completing task activities which leads to development regarding their performance. Students impressions toward this approach were positive as they don't support teacher-centered lessons where they cannot find enough opportunities to express themselves in the target language. The findings presented in this paper are a classroom experience. In the above study, it was found that with lower-intermediate to intermediate learners, the relatively closed tasks stimulate more modified interaction than relatively more open tasks. "Closed" tasks are ones that are highly structured and have very specific goals, for example, Work in pairs or group to find differences in the picture. Whereas, "Open" tasks are the ones that are less structured, with a less specific goal as for example comparing things, journeys or experiences. The last ones are considered to be more creative.

The task-based teaching enables learners to acquire new linguistic knowledge and to develop their existing knowledge. TBL is motivating students but also promotes students-centered approach, which is one of the principles of the language teaching. Students were more eager to learn, and often excited, in contrast to the following book activities only. The approach is especially very beneficial in mixed ability classrooms as it supports cooperative learning, where students working together can help each other. Task-based learning enables students to be actively engaged with language in an authentic context and challenges them to build meanings and patterns which make them develop into autonomous learners.

English teachers should be open towards implementation of task-based activities in their classes. They should offer their students a variety of enjoyable tasks. Participating in tasks influences student progress and attitudes toward the lesson. Rather than being a passive listeners, students prefer to be active receivers. (Ruso ,1999)

Limitations

Task-based activities challenged students to become noisy, usually speaking in mother tongue, meaning that students may produce little TL. Time for implementation of this experiment was too short; maybe implementing this method over more periods of time may yield different findings. The study was limited to a relatively low number of students. It should also be assess in other language levels as EAP, ESP etc.

Recommendations for further Research

Another study should be carried out, involving advanced level students. A bigger sample of students should be used. And ideally, there should be some more reliable data provided as for instance during the speaking activity students might be video recorded or audio record.

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- Questionnaires, Interview, Speaking rubric
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Appendix I: Questionnaire on teachers' perceptions

Questionnaire on teachers' perceptions of Task-based Language Learning

Strongly disagree	1	←	→	5	strongly agree
1. I am familiar with the theories of TBL.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I am familiar with the practice and methodologies of TBL.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I believe that tasks should have a primary focus on meaning.	1	2	3	4	5
4. TBL should make use of authentic material	1	2	3	4	5
5. The use of authentic materials enhances students' interest/ motivation for Learning	1	2	3	4	5
6. Team work is essential to the successful implementation of TBL.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I favor a mixture of TBL approach with other teaching approaches.	1	2	3	4	5
8. TBL provides students with more opportunities to use English.	1	2	3	4	5
9. TBL can increase learners' motivation to learn.	1	2	3	4	5
10. TBL can transform the learning process to be more meaningful.	1	2	3	4	5
11. TBL can improve learners' communicative competency.	1	2	3	4	5
12. TBL can enhance learners' fluency in English.	1	2	3	4	5
13. TBL can improve learners' accuracy in English.	1	2	3	4	5
14. TBL can enhance the interactions among students in class.	1	2	3	4	5
15. TBL can increase the opportunities for learners to use English for communication.	1	2	3	4	5
16. TBL pursues the development of integrated skills in the classroom	1	2	3	4	5
17. A task has a clearly defined outcome.	1	2	3	4	5

Adapted from: <http://hub.hku.hk/bitstream/>

Appendix II: Questionnaire on students' perceptions

Strongly disagree	1	←	→	5	strongly agree
1. Task-based learning helps learners enjoy learning English.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I believe that I can learn English faster when I use it more often.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Task activities give me more chances to practice English.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I am more motivated by the task which connects to real life situation than the activities in the book?	1	2	3	4	5
5. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Task -based learning advanced my critical thinking.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Using tasks activities is a good way to improve English vocabulary.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I enjoy group work.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Task activities enhance students' autonomy.	1	2	3	4	5
10. task-based learning activates learners' needs and interests.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I improved my speaking skills using task-based activities.	1	2	3	4	5
12. task-based learning provides a relaxed atmosphere. to promote target language use.	1	2	3	4	5

Adapted from: <http://hub.hku.hk/bitstream/>

The evaluation rubric will measure proficiency in expressing oneself in English.*

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1	Score
Grammar	Grammar covered in class was used to communicate effectively.	A few minor difficulties arose from not using the grammar studied in class.	Grammatical errors led to many minor difficulties or one major breakdown in communication.	Grammatical errors severely hampered communication.	AB
Vocabulary	Vocabulary studied in class was used to express ideas eloquently.	A few minor difficulties arose from not using appropriate vocabulary.	Some difficulties arose due to limited vocabulary and/or bad diction.	Communication was severely hampered due to lack of vocabulary.	
Fluency	Student acted as a facilitator, helping the conversation flow and develop.	Some minor difficulties maintaining the conversation were evident.	Some effort was required to maintain the conversation. There may have been a few long pauses.	Much effort was required to maintain the conversation. There may have been many long pauses.	
Listening	Student responded to questions with appropriate answers, acknowledged all statements, and incorporated them into the discussion.	Student responded to most questions, acknowledged most statements, and incorporated many of these into the conversation.	Student failed to answer some questions appropriately OR failed to acknowledge some statements and incorporate these into the conversation.	Student didn't understand or ignored most questions and statements. Student may have been using notes.	
Voice and non-verbal communication	Pronunciation was clear and inflection and expressions were used to enhance communication.	No serious problems arose, but better pronunciation, inflection, and/or non-verbal communication could have made communication more efficient.	Some communication problems arose due to unclear pronunciation and/or lack of inflection and/or expression. Student may have been difficult to hear.	Pronunciation, inflection, and/or expression confused communication. Student may have been very difficult to hear.	

*http://www.eslgo.com/resources/sa/oral_evaluation.html